

THE REUNION OF CHRISTENDOM

“That they all may be one.” Such was the prayer of Christ the Lord on the eve of His sacred Passion. It was addressed to His eternal Father in behalf of all who were to profess His Name until the end of time. But a glance at the Christian world of today reveals a horrible spectacle. Many have disregarded the touching plea of the Redeemer for unity among His followers and, giving way to their own perverse wills, have woefully rent the Church, His mystical body. However, from the hearts of all true lovers and followers of the Divine Shepherd there still arises the prayer for unity which He Himself has taught. For these, unspeakable happiness will mark the day eventually to dawn upon a united Christendom.

Many serious-minded and thinking Protestants, more especially of the Anglican Communion, are manifesting a growing disgust for the well-nigh countless divisions and re-divisions of sects professing Christian belief. Questions relating to the union of the churches are receiving much attention today, as the advantages of unity are daily becoming more apparent. The Lambeth Conferences of the Church of England appoint special committees of bishops whose duties are to study and to discuss this all-important matter. Recently there was formed an inter-church league whose members are pledged to work for Christian unity, and talks on the subject are frequently heard in the various Protestant churches.

Considering the interest in unity evident among our separated brethren today, a short study of the matter will be timely. In the following pages, therefore, it is proposed to give brief accounts of noteworthy attempts at reunion, both in the distant past and in times more recent. Included will be efforts made by Christians of both Eastern and Western churches, and also the reasons why they failed. Prospects of reunion will be considered, and the conclusion will be a description of the Church's attitude in this regard.

I

The year 1054 marks a sad event in the history of the Church—namely, the final separation of the Eastern Christians from the See of Peter. To Michael Caerularius, then Patriarch of

Constantinople, is due responsibility for this breach. The Popes, however, continued their accustomed solicitude for their unruly children of the East, and when, in 1092, every one of the great bishoprics of Asia had fallen into the hands of the Turk, Gregory VII considered the sending of his troops eastwards. They were to "reestablish Christian unity, repulse the Turk, and rescue the Holy Sepulchre."¹

Pope Gregory, however, was forced to abandon his designs and their execution was left to his successor, Urban II, the real originator of the Crusades. It is to be lamented that far from uniting the Christians of East and West, the Crusades actually strengthened the separation as many abuses were committed on both sides. Thus these great enterprises failed in the realization of one of their prime purposes.

The year 1274 saw the gathering at Lyons, of the fourteenth ecumenical council. Among the various questions proposed for deliberation, the chief were the launching of a crusade, and the reunion of the Greeks and Latins. It was for the solution of the latter, that St. Thomas Aquinas had written his book "Against the Errors of the Greeks." (The Saint died while on the way to this council.) Greek representatives were invited and they came in the persons of the Patriarchs of Constantinople and of Antioch. The close of the discussions brought with it an unconditional submission to the Roman Pontiff, on the part of the Greek Emperor, Michael Palaeologus, and the Greek bishops. The satisfaction accruing from this act proved to be short-lived, as the people at large rebelled and refused union with Rome. Before long the submission was revoked.

The next move towards reunion began with the Greeks. The Turk, as we learn from history, has always been a menace to the Christian. This was particularly true during the fifteenth century when Constantinople, the greatest stronghold of the Oriental Christians, was frequently harassed. In 1439, the situation became so desperate that the leaders in the East were forced to seek assistance from the Western prelates who were at that time gathered for the Council of Florence. In their eagerness for help, the schismatic bishops and civil authorities actually submitted to the Holy See, at the same time drawing up formal decrees of reunion.

¹ "Crusades"—Catholic Encyclopedia.

The masses, however, resented this action and refused to comply. As the danger became less apparent, the bishops and emperors, too, began to relent of their hasty submission and before long the union was cancelled and forgotten. Faulty motives were evidently the reason for the failure of this attempt to reunite the East with Rome.

Withal, from these proceedings, two favorable results were gained for the Western Church, namely, the conversion of the great Bessarion, who became a renowned cardinal, and the formation of the Greek Uniats. The latter remain to this day—an example to the world of a body of Christians who have fulfilled every condition for a real and lasting reunion.

A third great movement originated among the Slavs. In the latter part of the sixteenth century, a number of Ruthenian bishops announced their dissatisfaction and disgust for the appalling ignorance and immorality of the Orthodox clergy. The growth of their church also was terribly stunted compared with that of the Latins, and hence reunion with the Mother Church was, to their minds, imperative.

A synod was consequently held at Brest, a city of Lithuania, in June, 1590. Here it was agreed to "submit their will and intelligence to the Pope of Rome."² A decree of reunion was therefore drawn up and sent to Clement VIII. It contained a most humble and complete submission to the "Vicar of Christ" in all things, but besought the preservation of the ancient rites and calendar to which the people had so long been accustomed. These requests were gladly granted by the Pope and the reunion was soon effected. Great was the rejoicing throughout Western Christendom when the noble step of the Ruthenians became known.

This union gave promise of eventually gaining the great Russian empire to the spiritual power of the See of Peter, but Poland, to which the Ruthenians were subject, fell and was divided. The part which passed under Austrian rule was fortunate in having its religion unimpaired. That, on the other hand, which fell into Russian power, suffered a terrible fate, the oppressors stopping at no violence to crush all allegiance to Rome, and consequently, many were driven back into schism.

² Palmieri—"Union of Brest"—Catholic Encyclopedia.

II

Let us now turn to the West after the great revolt of the sixteenth century. A pitiable sight meets our gaze for we see a "house divided against itself." Christians there are who no longer glory in the name of Catholic, but who have grouped themselves under the banners of such men as Luther, Calvin, Knox, Wycliff and the like. Having despised the center of unity and the faith so dear to their own fathers, they now stand divided into as many sects as there are men bold enough to proclaim themselves leaders.

Many attempts have been made to reunite Catholics and Protestants in the past, but failure has been the inevitable lot of them all. Spinola, the first great name we see, was a bishop of the Church of Rome. After years of careful consideration of the question, and conferences with all the leading Protestants of his day, he drew up a scheme for reunion. This the Pope and the cardinals approved, but French influence, brought to bear upon the plan, caused its final abandonment. Spinola tried again but being far too extravagant in his concessions to the Protestants, failed to receive sanction.

Another great worker for the union of Western Christians was Leibnitz, one of the most profound thinkers of his day. After long and mature study of the question, he formulated the principles which to his mind seemed adequate for its final solution. "Patient investigation by each side of the points at issue, and an exact statement of the views of both sides, so that good sense might decide between them," was according to Leibnitz, the direct and only path to reunion.³ He started a correspondence with the famous bishop, Bossuet, hoping thus to initiate the actual carrying out of his plan. Nothing resulted, however, as his claims for the Protestants in the event of a union were incompatible both with the doctrine and discipline of the Church. Leibnitz continued firm in hope, frequently saying, "Reunion will yet take place, for it is the will of God."⁴

The next reunionist to be considered is the great Bossuet himself. Bishop of Meaux in France, and one of the greatest orators the world has known, he was naturally looked upon as a leader of uncommon merit. His whole life, but more especially

³ Spencer Jones—"England and the Holy See."

⁴ Ibid.

the latter part, was wrapped up in the idea of reuniting Protestant and Catholic, and works of great value upon the subject are the fruits of his pen. The bishop is alleged to have expected success at no time, but be that as it may, his labors were stupendous. Bossuet was willing to grant to the sects everything that was not contrary to orthodoxy, but he held that if stable reunion were ever to be had, it must be through entire submission to the divinely constituted head of Christendom. This, of course, was far from agreeable to the leaders of the Protestants and so Bossuet died without seeing his cherished hopes fulfilled.

III

We now turn from the past to more modern times. Still the same sad fact confronts us—Christendom remains divided. The Greeks hold aloof as scornfully as ever, while the Protestants, clinging tenaciously to their fundamental principle of private interpretation, are consequently still dividing. Notwithstanding these lamentable circumstances, many great men have raised their voices for the cause of reunion in our own day. Space allows the mention of only a few.

In 1846 Pope Pius IX assumed the responsibility of Chief Pastor of the Church of Christ. One of his first public acts was the issuing of an invitation to the Orthodox Greeks to negotiate for reunion. Again in 1869 when summoning the Vatican Council, this zealous Pontiff gave the East an opportunity to reunite with Rome. To both of these messages the Greeks replied in a manner derisive and insulting.

Pope Leo XIII, toward the close of his wonderful life, addressed his last encyclical, "Praeclara," to all Christians. Throughout the document, he maintains the tone of a father gently begging his scattered children to return home. To the Orthodox Greeks his kindness is remarkable. The great Pontiff manifests the highest regard for the antiquity of their episcopal sees, their rites and customs, and concerning the latter, assures their "preservation without any narrowness," in case of reunion. In short his letter is the essence of charity, courtesy, and every refinement.

Were the Greeks touched by this gentle appeal? Alas no! Lord Anthimos VII, who then governed as Patriarch at Constan-

tinople, left no word unsaid which might heap abuse on the Vicar of Christ. His reply to the Pontiff's kindly words begins thus: "The devil has prompted the Bishops of Rome to feelings of unbearable pride, through which they have introduced a number of impious novelties contrary to the Gospel."⁵ Needless to state, reunion is utterly impossible while such men hold places of authority among the Orthodox.

IV

Though the Christians of Western Europe are divided into a surprisingly large number of sects to the delight of all enemies of Christ, still many movements have been started among them for reunion.

The first we mention, namely, the Association for Promoting the Unity of Christendom, was founded in 1857 by Ambrose de Lisle, a convert, and Dr. George Frederick Lee, an Anglican clergyman. Prayer for unity was the prime duty of each member. The society grew numbering many thousands in a remarkably short time. Because of its praiseworthy motives and the means it employed, we are constrained to respect this organization. Catholics, however, were forbidden to join, owing to the fact that its government was entirely in the hands of those whom the Church considers heretics.

In the Lambeth Conferences of the Anglican Church, the considerations regarding the reunion of Christendom have always had a very important place. Unfortunately, those especially charged with this work have not always been disposed to think of Rome, limiting their purpose to the Greeks alone. There was a change, however, in the Conference of 1908, as may be seen from the following extract: "They (the Committee) desire to place upon record their conviction that no projects of union can ever be regarded as satisfactory which deliberately leaves out the Churches of the Latin Communion."⁶

The last Conference at Lambeth was held in July and August of 1920. Once more the Committee on Reunion set to work and in their report we find embodied the following words—remarkable when spoken by representative divines of the Church of England: "Should the Church of Rome at any time desire to

⁵ Fortescue—"Orthodox Eastern Church."

⁶ "Five Lambeth Conferences"—compiled by Davidson.

discuss conditions of reunion, we shall be ready to welcome such discussions." Dispositions such as these certainly augur well for the sacred cause of union.

Of the present Holy Father, Pope Benedict XV, in his relations to this subject, notice must here be made. His shepherd's heart, like those of his predecessors, extends lovingly to the sheep that have strayed, but beyond inviting and urging humble submission to his divine authority, he is impotent. It was thus that he expressed himself when approached by the representatives of the inter-church league.

V

In speaking of the statements drawn up by the last Lambeth Conference on the matter of reunion, Father Vincent McNabb, O. P., says: "We are not so zeal-blinded as to see in them the dawn of reunion. But they are the most authentic promise of dawn that has yet appeared in the dark night legacied to us by the sixteenth century." And so this "promise of dawn" seems about the brightest prospect that we have today of the union of Christians. But that is something. Another great help to the worthy cause is the swift collapsing among educated Protestants, of the walls of prejudice which have kept many from the sight of the beauty of the Church of Rome.

Individual conversions to the Catholic faith are many in these days, but if the unity of Christendom were to be brought about in this way alone, ages would be necessary for the consummation of the task. And if whole Churches were to submit to Rome corporately, much might be feared from the civil power which would most probably interfere. So, humanly speaking, the day which will see Christendom reunited does seem far distant. On the other hand, we should place our trust in the power of God, Who knows the solution of every problem.

VI

A suitable ending for these considerations presents itself in a description of the attitude of Rome toward this great subject of reunion.

First of all the Church realizes that what caused some of her children to withdraw was their blindness to the divine au-

¹ Article "Canterbury and Rome"—Blackfriars, Oct., 1920.

thority which she possesses, and also to the promises given her by her Divine Founder. For these her never-ending prayer is that they all may see and believe, and soon return, humble and repentant, to her embrace.

The Church meets all advances toward reconciliation as a loving but firm mother. Many accuse her of being proud and unbending when negotiations for reunion are under way, but let it be understood that in matters of doctrine, the Church cannot be otherwise. All of her doctrines are stamped with divine truth and these, consequently, she cannot in the least change. In questions of discipline, the Church is always as yielding as is compatible with her divine mission.

Again, it can be safely said that there is no church on the face of the earth, so desirous that Christians should be reunited as is the ancient Church of Rome. Nor do her desires stop with believers in Christ, but they extend to the whole human race as it has been given her from above to lead all men unto salvation.

In the prayer of the great Pontiff, Leo XIII, we find expressed the sentiments of all the faithful: "May God, Who is rich in mercy, and in Whose power are the times and moments, grant our wishes and desires, and in His great goodness hasten the fulfillment of that divine promise of Jesus Christ: 'There will be one Fold, and one Shepherd.'"⁸

⁸ Encyclical "Praeclara"—Leo XIII.

—Bro. Bernardine Myers, O. P.

